



Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On this annual occasion of celebrating the life of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., most reflect upon the August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and his delivery of the historic “I Have A Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial. The dream to which he gave voice on behalf of millions of Americans subject to discrimination and economic repression galvanized our nation. It led to action by our nation’s leaders: the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 followed by that of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Yet since that historic day in August 1963, Dr. King delivered many a speech and sermon that instilled hope, lifting the spirit of dejected souls and stirring the collective conscience of our nation still marred by social and economic strife. For me, each of Dr. King’s addresses moved me to the question that defined his actions each day — “What can I do?”

Oftentimes, it is unknown how great leaders desire to be remembered after they have departed us. Not so with Dr. King. In “The Drum Major Instinct” sermon he preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia on February 4, 1968, just two months before his assassination, he spoke of the drum major instinct — one’s innate desire to be front and center, to lead the parade, to be first — and how such desire may lead to the attention at the exclusion of others and self-importance. Dr. King, instead, spoke of how each one of us may harness greatness from within through service.

Concluding this sermon, Dr. King thinks about the eulogy at his own funeral, and asks, “What is it that I would want said?” He responds:

“Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I’d like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that’s all I want to say...”

Imagine our nation where everyone can be great by living a life dedicated to justice, peace, and righteousness.
Happy birthday, Dr. King.

